

Preliminary Report on Interstate Migration
of
Agricultural Labor in the Atlantic Seaboard Area
by the Labor Division,
Farm Security Administration
United States Department of Agriculture

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During the past two years, much discussion has been given to the migration of farm workers and the social problems accompanying this migration. Usually, this discussion has involved many informal estimates as to the numbers involved, the conditions, etc. The Labor Division of the Farm Security Administration was asked to make a survey of the Atlantic Coast area in order to establish a factual basis for considering remedial action. The present statement is only preliminary to a final report on the study made, but it offers some basic quantitative factors for consideration.

The study revealed that the potato migration, though not the largest in terms of numbers involved, is the one which is of definite interstate character, moving successively from northern Florida into South Carolina, North Carolina, Virginia, and New Jersey before turning south again. Potato picking starts in early April in the Hastings section of north Florida, attracting approximately 3,000 workers.

When potatoes are finished there in the middle of May, between 1,500 and 2,000 of the workers move into Charleston County, South Carolina, concentrating mainly in and around Meggett. The harvest is completed here about the middle of June, and the migrants move into North Carolina, where there are several concentrations, the largest being the Elizabeth City area, taking in Pasquotank, Camden, and Currituck counties. By the time the movement reaches this area its numbers have been augmented by local workers, bringing the number up to 3,000.



The harvest is completed here in a month to six weeks, and by the third week in July the migrants are on their way across the Norfolk-Cape Charles ferry. Once across, the migration divides. Part of it stays on the eastern shore of Virginia and Maryland,, part of it goes directly into the Hightstown area of New Jersey.

There is evidence that the greatest numbers finally merge in the latter area in late July and remain there for about six weeks. By the time the migration has reached New Jersey, it numbers between 4,000 and 5,000 workers. A portion of the migrants continue into Long Island, New York, for the potato harvest, but the great majority of migrants turn south again.

The migration along the Atlantic Coast is made up almost completely of Negroes, of whom the great majority are unattached male workers. Relatively few of these workers have cars, the majority being carried on the trucks of contractors. These contractors are largely truckers and farmers from north Florida who have invested heavily in trucking and potato digging and grading machinery and who move up along the Coast contracting with the farmer to dig, haul, and grade the potatoes for a set price. The labor is brought along to perform the job; and its presence on the scene is assurance to the farmer that the contractor is not a racketeer who will take an advance from the farmer and not show up with the labor.

Frequently the farmer will contract only the hauling and grading of the potatoes, and will hire the pickers and pay them himself. In such cases, it is to the contractor's benefit to have on hand a labor supply to use as an inducement to the farmer to turn over the hauling and grading

jobs to the contractor. Because of this dependence, the contractor is willing to haul the workers from place to place, in most cases without charging them anything. The workers, on the other hand, are dependent on the contractor for obtaining the jobs and the transportation. As a result of this interdependence, a working relationship is maintained.

The practice, however, relieves the farmer of major responsibilities in the handling of labor, particularly where he lets a contract for the entire job of digging, hauling, and grading. In some areas, particularly New Jersey and South Carolina, more than one-half of the potatoes are dug under the contract system. Frequently an irresponsible contractor, unable to get any contracts, may leave a group of workers stranded somewhere along the line without transportation.

Housing for the potato migrants along the Atlantic Coast consists mainly of unoccupied box-cars, the floors of packing sheds and grading stations, and unoccupied hay-lofts, barns, and shacks on the farm. Overcrowding is typical, twelve to fifteen people often being housed in a shack measuring about 12'x 15'. Any old, unoccupied house serves as many as 35 workers. In most cases toilets, when they exist, are so filthy and insanitary that the migrants refuse to use them and seek the nearest patch of woods instead. Cooking facilities are completely absent except for an occasional broken-down stove discarded by the farmer. Weird collections of scrap iron and bricks ingeniously wired together somehow serve as cooking facilities for the majority of migrants. Under such conditions, the health of migrants has not flourished; but it cannot at this time be stated the extent to which migration under such circumstances has been responsible for ill health.

While there are no tabulations available on earnings and income of all the potato migrants at this time, there are data which show that the annual income of these workers is extremely low, falling into the income level of the poorest sections of the American population.

In addition to the interstate, coastal migration of workers for the potato harvest, there are several other significant migrations on the Atlantic Coast of a more local character, but involving larger numbers than even the interstate migration. The strawberry harvest in Chadbourne North Carolina, draws 5,000 Negroes from a radius of 75 miles. The season in Chadbourne begins in early April and is completed in six weeks. Only 70 miles away, the Wallace area draws about 10,000 migrants for the strawberry harvest, at about the same time as the Chadbourne area. This migration also is locally recruited. While the moves are short ones, they are significant in that such large numbers flock into these areas for such low returns, indicating that the place of origin is a depressed "problem" area. For instance, it was found that 40 percent of the Chadbourne migrants originate in Marion County, South Carolina, only about 20 miles from Chadbourne. Upon further investigation of Marion County, it was found that in the town alone, with a population of 4,000, there were about 2,000 usually without work, and further south in the county, several thousand subsistence level farmers whose position in the economy was declining to the point where even subsistence at the lowest level is impossible.

The whole background against which the seasonal migration of large numbers of Negroes takes place is in the general impoverishment of agriculture in the South, and a long-time trend in certain areas of the

South Atlantic states leading to the displacement of Negroes on the farm. This is creating a large group of foot-loose people whose background in agricultural work leads them to seek seasonal agricultural labor, which they often obtain through acceptance of a lower wage scale than that acceptable to the local labor available.

Another significant migration occurring along the Atlantic Coast is the movement of several thousand Italian families from Philadelphia and Camden into the truck areas of southern New Jersey. This migration does not present the same kind of problem, since the group is not as depressed as the Negroes who migrate. The problem of these families is one of unemployment and underemployment in the city.

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